



DESIGNING WITH BULBS

A N OVERVIEW OF METHODS USED TO ENHANCE THE SPRING LANDSCAPE

Winter has gardening year is to rake leaves come and gone, and the fuzzy and empty the pots. Planting gray has lifted to crisp sunbeams hitting the inert landscape of our Midwestern yards. We are entering that uncomfortable period of time between beautiful snowfalls and the first bloom appearing in the garden. It is the time when that last snow melts away, leaving a gray dusty film for about a month until the April rain showers come, renewing our landscapes with greening grass and colorful blooms.

This in-between time is the perfect time for spring bulbs - but many people overlook how psychologically important this time is to us all, to see bloom and growing plants. And the reason is because bulbs need to be planted in the fall - six months before they actually have impact in the landscape. Buying bulbs is not an instant gratification shopping experience. Good retailers know that their best business comes from offering products that are immediately gratifying.

Bulbs defy this type of marketing technique. In addition, most people are finished working in their yards by September, when the kids go back to school. The last activity of many homeowners'

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However many bulb growers send out catalogs in the spring so that you can look at your 'lacking' spring landscape and pick varieties from the catalog and plan and order ahead for the fall planting season. Of course this involves keeping copious notes, so you remember where you planned for the bulbs to be planted.

I still see homeowners making mistakes or 'missing opportunities' when it comes to using bulbs in their landscape. The most common mistake is to buy a group of bulbs, i.e. tulips, in a quantity of five or so and then buy another variety to 'try'. This makes for a landscape of bulbs that look like 'a little of this and a little of that.' But it takes at least 25 tulips to make an impact! And

when using tulips, which have a predictable decline in bloom quality after the second year, many gardeners get a smaller 'small' group of bulbs in succeeding years. The bulbs have ceased to have any impact at all.

If you would compare your home landscape with the delicate beauty of the spring bloom of our native forest floor (which is often blooming at the same time), the whole effect of this scene is that of massed blooms with occasional standouts in color. This look can easily be transferred to the home landscape by understanding massing and focal points.

Picture a front foundation planting which may typically have a crabapple at the corner of the house with groundcover perennials underneath, a group of evergreens or shrubs running along the front of the house and some open ground (used for annual plantings in the summer) along a front walk leading to the front door. Choosing bulbs properly involves conceptualizing where focal points (a tree, a door) are and what areas support these focal points.

Focal point areas should be

planted with focal point varieties and non-focal point areas can be planted with massing bulbs. Most people, when purchasing bulbs, pick up those varieties that are the prettiest. They forget that many other bulbs perform an important function of carpeting or under planting the stand-outs.

Some important background bulbs would be Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*) whose early blue 6" spikes will quickly naturalize in a semi-shady bed; snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) whose nodding white and green blooms can peek thru snow cover as early as February within thick naturalized colonies; Puschkinia (*Puschkinia libanotica*) and glory-of-the-snow (*Chionodoxa*) also showing spikes of pale blue to blue blooms early in the season in naturalizing colonies. The proper method of arranging these bulbs is to locate them in an area where they will be an under planting a large tree, or accentuating already existing woodland plantings. And then take handfuls of the bulbs and throw them out on the soil, planting them where they land. This lends a very naturalized look to the initial planting design.

In calculating the number of bulbs necessary, just figure the approximate square footage of the open area intended for planting. If it is an area that is 10' x 10', that equates to 100 square feet. The number of bulbs necessary might be 1 per square foot on bulbs like crocus or Siberian squill that naturalize quickly. Or for a more immediate effect, you can plant several more bulbs per square foot. The quantity of bulbs can quickly add up, but it is worth the addition of these background plants.

Galanthus can be planted in a different manner, by grabbing a handful of the diminutive bulbs and planting 10-20 in the same hole. This reproduces the look of the colony type of growth seen with *Galanthus*. Crocus can be planted in much the same way.



Galanthus has nodding white flowers.

Some tulips can be suitable for naturalizing, and yes they will come back in succeeding years. The best variety for consistent repeat performance is Tarda tulip (*Tulipa tarda*) whose small star-shaped yellow blooms snuggle into strap-shaped leaves. Their low growth habit (8" or so) makes them ideal as a groundcover bulb. They can be interplanted with existing groundcovers by using the 'bouquet' planting method, where a group of 6-7 bulbs can be set into one hole.

Daffodils are another good bulb for either naturalizing or focal point plantings. When naturalizing them in the woodlands, they can be planted with the same techniques already noted; either broadcast or planted singly where they fall or in bouquets.

Tulips are generally thought of as the quintessential spring flower. Many gardeners avoid using them now after learning that they have a tendency to decline in bloom after the first year. It is best to plan for their decline just as you would plan for the eventual demise of your annual plantings at frost time. Renewing tulip bulb plantings can be an activity every two years.

Some focal point bulbs will return reliably longer and for that reason I often combine the reliable ones with the whimsical ones. The Emperor tulip group (*Fosteriana*) is very reliable, but the double flowering peony group is not. Angelique tulip, a bestseller double pale pink, is best used in a group of 20-30. The cost of the group of bulbs might be around \$15-20, similar to the cost of well-grown annual basket or pot.

The annual basket would be replaced every year, while the bulbs would be ideally replaced

every other year. Daffodils on the other hand would never need replacement and would continue to grow into thick colonies of plants. It is this understanding of the nature of bulbs that is essential to their proper use.

Some bulbs are 'perennial' and some are 'annual'. While some are background plants and others are focal point material. They can create the same level of complexity in the spring garden as the mixture of annuals and perennials can in the summer-time flower border.

The next level of design is the successful pairing of spring blooming bulbs with spring-blooming perennials.

